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GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF THE HACKENSACK RIVER'S COMEBACK

New NJMC study shows mud-dwellers are rebounding

LYNDHURST, N.J. – An increase in the number and biodiversity of small creatures that live on the bottom of the Hackensack River is the latest evidence of the river's revitalization in the Meadowlands, according to the results of a study by the NJMC's Meadowlands Environmental Research Institute (MERI).

"From the tiny life forms that inhabit the river bottom to the egrets that fly overhead, creatures big and small are returning to the Hackensack River," said Joseph Doria, Chairman of the NJMC and Commissioner of the New Jersey Department of Community Affairs. "This study is the latest proof that our efforts to clean up the river and its surrounding wetlands are getting major results."

MERI, the scientific arm of the NJMC, conducted a survey of benthic macroinvertebrates – tiny organisms such as snails, worms and clams – in 2002. The outcome showed benthic organisms making great gains, when compared to the results of the same study conducted in 1987. In 19 of 26 locations that were sampled, there was significantly higher biodiversity and abundance.

The subjects of the benthic study are ecologically important because they provide food for fish and other invertebrates and act as nature's recyclers. They eat the detritus and organic matter that settles on the bottom of the river and its tributaries, in the process recycling nutrients and helping oxygenate the mud at the bottom of the river.

The benthic study also indicated that the river's bottom has been getting cleaner as sewage-treatment plants have been upgraded and industrial pollution has been curtailed. But, the overwhelming abundance of a few resilient species, found at several locations within the mid to upper portion of the Meadowlands, indicates that this system is still stressed.

“As we have seen from other studies, these improvements translate up the food chain to fish and birds, and that’s good news for us all,” said Robert Ceberio, Executive Director of the NJMC. “We realize plenty of work still lies ahead to restore the environment in the Meadowlands, but we are absolutely determined to reach that goal.”

A recent study sponsored and assisted by the NJMC and conducted by the New Jersey Audubon Society documented more than 150,000 birds of 200 avian species, many of them threatened and endangered, inhabiting the Meadowlands at some point during the year. A MERI study found local fish populations in the Meadowlands making a comeback as well. The benthic survey is the latest sign of the area’s resurgence.

The original benthic macroinvertebrate survey conducted in 1987 recovered 65,565 organisms from 52 categories in a total of 284 benthic collections. During the 2002 survey, 215,296 organisms representing 67 categories were identified from 312 collections. A total of 89 benthic categories were identified during both surveys.

The survey involved some extremely labor-intensive work that included manually sifting and sorting through three sets of mud samples at 26 locations for each of all four seasons – or 312 samples for each of the surveys. In some cases, a magnifying glass was needed to find these organisms.

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